

Australia: Labor seeks to impose real pay cuts on education staff in New South Wales

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The New South Wales (NSW) Labor government has reneged on a one-year pay increase for teachers and other education workers. It is now seeking to impose a four-year industrial award that will lock in significant real wage cuts. The pitiful offer exposes the fraud of Labor's pre-election promise to address poor pay and excessive workload in public sector schools.

In June, the NSW government announced that public sector workers would receive a 4 percent increase in wages from July 1, in addition to a 0.5 percent increase in superannuation payments. The offer was purportedly aimed at stemming the number of public sector workers who are leaving their professions, burnt out from years of workload intensification and pay cuts.

The proposal was for a one-year agreement, during which time new awards would be negotiated using an "interest based bargaining approach" with the public sector unions. The aim of this process is for unions to "engage with government agencies to identify savings and productivity gains in exchange for pay increases."

For teachers, the wage deal was to include a variation to their current award to raise wages by varying amounts (from 4.3 percent to 10.6 percent for teachers with more than two years' experience, 12.2 percent for beginning teachers and 20.6 percent for teachers with more than one year of experience), with an extension of the current award to June 2024.

When taken with the level of inflation since mid-2020, the increases for the majority of teachers do not even come close to meeting the rising cost of living. Furthermore, the deal offered nothing on workloads. In fact, it explicitly stated that there was only "a commitment to ongoing negotiations regarding workload and a reduction in face-to-face teaching."

On July 28, the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) announced that the government had withdrawn this offer and was now offering the same wage increases for the first year, but that these would be followed by three years of 2.5 percent wage increases. Even based on the Reserve Bank of Australia's ambitious forecast that inflation will reach 2.75 percent by the end of 2026, this represents successive real pay cuts for the life of the award.

In comments to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation,

NSWTF president Angelo Gavrielatos responded: "This is unheard of. This is unprecedented. In my decades of experience, never before has a government walked away from a deal in the way that we are experiencing now. This is an act of betrayal."

Gavrielatos is desperately seeking to cover his tracks. The NSWTF aggressively promoted the election of a Labor government, knowing full well that it would continue and intensify the bipartisan program of slashing real wages.

Even prior to the March election, Labor leader Chris Minns explicitly stated that public sector wages would not increase in line with inflation and that wage growth would be tied to increased "productivity." Minns vowed to maintain "targets" of 3-3.5 percent nominal wage growth.

NSW Education Minister and Deputy Premier Prue Car responded to the accusation of a betrayal on Twitter, claiming that raising teacher pay was a high priority, but insisting that productivity gains need to be identified and agreed. That is the same position Labor took to the election: even nominal wage increases will have to be paid for by cuts to conditions.

Gavrielatos has been a promoter of the big business Labor Party for decades as a leading union bureaucrat. He knew all of this when he was telling teachers the opposite just months ago.

The union is continuing its cynical double act. As Labor demands "productivity improvements," the NSWTF has dropped any reference to the intolerable working conditions teachers face. This is a clear warning that it will not only refuse to fight for improved conditions but will enforce whatever the government demands.

The phony character of Gavrielatos' statement is demonstrated by the disconnect between words and actions.

The NSWTF is proclaiming a betrayal of "unprecedented" magnitude. But the NSWTF is proposing to do almost nothing in response.

Its leadership has promised to *consider* industrial action at the next council meeting in September if the government continues to only offer the four-year deal.

The union, in other words, cannot even bring itself to hold a rapidly convened meeting in response to this "unprecedented act of betrayal." The State Council will largely be a gathering of the affluent bureaucrats and their supporters, who are

implicated, through their promotion of Labor, in the very betrayal they decry.

Whatever the council decides, it can be guaranteed that it will be the opposite of the political and industrial struggle against the Labor government that is required.

Resuming industrial action under the leadership of the NSWTF means resuming a campaign of sporadic one-day stoppages and limited work bans, designed to wear teachers down and prevent any real challenge to the state government.

The union is now employing the same tactics that it used to shut down the struggle of teachers across the state in 2022. In a so-called “political campaign,” teachers are being encouraged to write letters to their local members, protest outside Labor MP’s offices and turn their backs on Minns and Car if they happen to come to their workplaces.

The latest attack comes after a year-long dispute between education staff and the former state Liberal-National government that included three one-day statewide strikes, in December 2021, May 2022 and June 2022. Tens of thousands of teachers took industrial action for the first time in a decade.

The massive turnout at strike rallies across NSW was essentially motivated by intolerable workloads, with teachers routinely compelled to put in 60 hours or more per week. Decades of funding cuts by Labor and Liberal-National governments have sharply increased the administrative work required of teachers and have led to chronic teacher shortages.

Seeking to contain the genuine disgust of teachers towards the attacks on public education, the NSWTF systematically sabotaged resistance within the schools, isolating teachers from each other and from industrial campaigns being waged by health workers and others in the public sector.

In November, the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) imposed a two-year award covering the wages and conditions of teachers in NSW from the start of 2022 to the end of 2023. The ruling gave educators a nominal pay increase of 0.25 percent, backdated to July 1, 2022, on top of a previously paid 2.04 percent, and a 2.53 percent increase for 2023. It did nothing to address the crippling workloads that teachers face.

Following the ruling, the NSWTF bureaucracy refused to organise any action whatsoever, instead diverting the teachers’ struggle into an election campaign for Labor. Along with the other unions, the NSWTF heavily promoted illusions that pay and conditions would be much improved under a state Labor government.

These promises were empty. Even prior to the election, Labor leader Chris Minns explicitly stated that public sector wages would not increase in line with inflation and that wage growth would be tied to increased “productivity.” Minns vowed to maintain “targets” of 3-3.5 percent nominal wage growth.

In recent weeks, the Health Services Union and the NSW Nurses and Midwives’ Association have narrowly pushed through Labor’s 4 percent deal, against substantial opposition from workers.

The attack on educators in NSW is in line with what has been carried out by Labor and the unions in other states and federally.

Last year, in Victoria, the Australian Education Union (of which the NSWTF is the NSW branch) worked hand-in-glove with the state Labor government to impose a massive wage cut. The sell-out agreement, rammed through despite unprecedented opposition from educators, delivered nominal pay increases of less than 2 percent per annum for four years and no relief from untenable workloads and onerous working conditions.

The federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has imposed broad budget cuts and is overseeing real wage cuts for public sector workers and those covered by federal awards.

In order to fight these attacks, teachers need to build their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, and link up with broader sections of the working class, including other public sector workers.

This will provide the basis for a political struggle against Labor, the unions and all other representatives of capitalism, which is incompatible with even the most basic functions of society, including a high-quality public education system with decent wages and conditions for all.

We urge teachers to contact the Committee for Public Education today to discuss this perspective and how you can build a rank-and-file committee in your school.

Contact us:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout

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To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact